

**Rhondda Cynon Taf Revised
Local Development Plan
2022 – 2037**

**The Urban Capacity Study
2023**



Table of Contents

1. Background	page 1
2. Local Context	page 1
3. National Planning Policy Context	page 1
4. Existing Work	page 3
5. Urban Capacity Study Methodology	page 5
6. Assessment of Identified Sites	page 7
7. Findings	page 8
8. Conclusion and Recommendations	page 9
9. Table 1: Breakdown of Large Sites Identified	page 10
10. Table 2: Breakdown of Small Sites Identified	page 11

1. Background

An Urban Capacity Study (UCS) is undertaken as part of the preparation of a Local Development Plan (LDP), to establish the scale of development that is possible to be accommodated within specific urban areas. An UCS can assist in identifying sites that are suitable for allocation in the LDP, or otherwise assist in the understanding of the potential scale of windfall development sites that we may expect to come forward.

This Urban Capacity Study has been prepared for the RCT Revised LDP to seek to identify sites that have potential to accommodate housing in the first instance; although having knowledge of the sites may allow consideration for alternative uses. This study will set out search criteria, including suitable locations of sites, positive characteristics and overriding constraints. Once these have been initially identified, certain assumptions are then made, such as housing density, in order to provide indicative housing figures that may come forward within the various search areas.

2. Local Context

2.1 Revised Local Development Plan

In April 2022, Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council formally began preparing a Revised Local Development Plan (RLDP) for the period 2022 - 2037. This will replace the current adopted LDP for Rhondda Cynon Taf (2006 – 2021).

This UCS and its outcomes have been used to inform the preparation of the initial stage of the RLDP, being the Preferred Strategy.

3. National Planning Policy Context

There is broad reference and guidance in national plans and policies in Wales for undertaking an UCS in the plan making process, without specific detail on the preparation methodology.

3.1 Planning Policy Wales (Edition 11) (Welsh Government) (February 2021)

In order to create sustainable places, PPW 3.41-57 encourages development plans to identify areas and sites for new development by creating a 'spatial strategy and site search sequence'. The priority for the search sequence is to identify suitable and sustainable previously developed land and/or underutilised sites for all types of development. The locations of such sites should be prioritised within existing settlements in the first instance, before considering sites on the edge of settlements at the next stage.

PPW Paragraph 3.44 recognises that where it has been clearly demonstrated that there are no suitable previously developed or underutilised sites, consideration should then move towards suitable and sustainable greenfield sites within or on the edge of settlements.

PPW (para 4.1.31) states that LPAs must ensure new development is fully accessible by active travel (walking and cycling), with the aim of creating 'walkable neighbourhoods' where a range of facilities are within walking distance for most

residents. Furthermore, paragraph 12.4.3 in Welsh Government's Active Travel Guidance (2020) states that "*walkable neighbourhoods are characterised by having a range of facilities within 10 minutes walking distance (about 800m) which people may access comfortably on foot*".

PPW (para. 4.2.14) advises that LPAs should maintain a register of suitable sites which fall below the threshold for allocation in the LDP. While the candidate site register will assist in delivering this objective, however a UCS can help to further inform the identification of site allocations. A UCS can also assist to demonstrate the delivery of the windfall allowance of a plan. This will assist in broadening the housing delivery options and enable the provision of housing by RSLs, SMEs, and self-build developers.

3.2 Future Wales: The National Plan 2040 (Welsh Government) (February 2021)

The National Plan recognises urban centres as the most sustainable locations for development. The spatial strategy of the NDF emphasises the need to build on existing strengths, focusing development in and around cities and large towns, arguing that to enable sprawling greenfield development would be "*to ignore the untapped potential of places which already have town centres, universities and colleges, public transport infrastructure and a good range of public services*".

Policy 1 of Future Wales identifies Rhondda Cynon Taf as within a National Growth Area (NGA) of 'Cardiff, Newport and the Valleys'. Policy 33 expands on this by reaffirming that this area will be the main focus for growth and investment in South East Wales, and that LDPs should recognise the NGA as "*the focus for strategic economic and housing growth*".

Policy 2 supports urban areas as the most sustainable places for development, encouraging compact and walkable urban neighbourhoods with good accessibility to mixed-use centres and public transport, with integrated green infrastructure.

Policy 6 promotes the 'Town Centre First' principle whereby significant new public service facilities must be located within town and city centres.

3.3 Development Plans Manual Edition 3 (Welsh Government) (March 2020)

The Development Plans Manual (edition 3) provides the following list of what could be considered within an UCS, though this will vary based on local circumstances:

- *Vacant land within a settlement boundary*
- *Subdivision of existing housing*
- *Flats over shops*
- *Empty homes*
- *Previously developed vacant and derelict land and buildings (non-housing)*
- *School closure programme / public body disposal strategy*
- *Open space surplus to requirements*
- *Intensification of existing housing areas*
- *Redevelopment of car parks*

- *Conversion of commercial buildings* (Para 5.63)

Paragraphs 10.21-23 includes some guidance on UCS, and although this is in reference to Spatial Development Plans (SDP), there remains alignment with LDPs nonetheless. It states that an UCS will be important to demonstrate the growth contribution of key settlements. Furthermore, it argues that “*an assessment of the numerical contribution of homes and jobs that can be delivered within existing defined urban boundaries, reflecting the placemaking approach, will be essential*” in terms of delivering an SDP (para 10.23).

Paragraphs 10.27-30 build on this further, stating that the UCS will be an important tool for SDPs to understand the varying capacities of key settlements for accommodating growth within existing settlement boundaries. Settlements identified within the Settlement Hierarchy as appropriate for accommodating growth, but have been evidenced by the UCS to be unable to accommodate growth within the existing settlement boundaries, will need to consider urban extensions in order to meet the identified need. The Development Plans Manual makes clear that existing communities should not be disadvantaged (for example, in terms of quality of environment and lifestyle) purely to avoid urban expansion on to greenfield sites.

4. Existing Work

4.1 Urban Capacity Study: Upper and Central Rhondda (August 2005)

An UCS was undertaken in 2005 during the preparation of the adopted LDP (2006-2021), focussing on the Rhondda Valleys. The aim of the study was to assess the potential for new residential, employment and commercial development to take place in the Central and Upper Rhondda Valleys as part of the Local Development Plan Process.

The scope of the study included:

- The identification and analysis of land over one third of a hectare for residential and employment development. The study prioritised the identification of brownfield sites for potential new allocations. Consideration was also given to greenfield land. However, the development of any potential greenfield sites was only considered appropriate where clear social, environmental and economic objectives could be met.
- Consideration of general access constraints on any possible development land. These were of particular concern in some areas due to existing street patterns and gradients.
- Reassessment of all existing unimplemented housing and employment allocations to ascertain its suitability for mixed residential and employment uses.

- Identifying opportunities of land where a range of mixed-use development, such as live-work spaces, would be appropriate and successful.
- An analysis of the Housing and Commercial property market in the Rhondda Fawr and Rhondda Fach. This included a breakdown in housing and commercial property structure, availability of housing stock and consumer demand.
- Identifying major buildings in the Rhondda valleys that were underused or derelict, in order to promote their rehabilitation, conversion or clearance.

4.2 Metro Nodes (2018)

The Metro Nodes project arose out of the progression of the South Wales Metro, brought forward by the CCR City Deal programme. Metro nodes are considered to be any point in the public transport network where two modes of transport may interchange or intersect. The main aims of the project are set out below:

1. Search for and assess land at existing rail network stations and the immediate surrounding areas to ascertain whether there was suitable land for expansion as transport interchange hubs.
2. Enhance transit-oriented development by searching for and assessing land within the residential catchment areas of these metro nodes. In order to achieve this, a nominal 800-metre buffer zone was positioned around the metro nodes. This is considered to be a generally appropriate walking distance in accordance with Welsh Government's Active Travel Guidance.
3. Formulate proposals and identify land ownerships within the indicative site boundaries.

Where appropriate, many of the sites identified from the Metro Nodes project have been carried forward into this UCS where their identification method matches the methodology of the UCS. (This was primarily a mapping exercise in line with the above methodology, with no final document for publication prepared).

5. The Urban Capacity Study Methodology

This UCS will take into account the national planning policy considerations highlighted above, whilst also developing a bespoke and necessary methodology for the specific needs of the RLDP. This methodology is set out in full below.

5.1 Search criteria

This UCS is a desk-based study, primarily using GIS (digital) Mapping systems and evidence, in search of land that could potentially be appropriate for residential development.

The search sequence of the UCS focusses primarily on land and buildings (for renovation, conversion or site redevelopment) suitable for residential and mixed-use residential development within or within appropriate and defined distances to RCT's defined town and retail centres.

This UCS is undertaken across the whole of the County Borough and focuses only on sites within the settlement boundary. Any sites within formal public open space, flood zones or sites of ecological interest (such as Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINC), Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), etc.) are not considered further. Furthermore, existing allocated sites in the Adopted LDP have not been considered in this Study as they are to be formally assessed through the RLDP Candidate Site process.

There is no minimum threshold regarding site size, though the findings section does differentiate sites between small sites (less than 0.3 hectares) and large sites (0.3 hectares or more).

A full list of opportunities that were considered appropriate to seek and identify for this UCS is provided below:

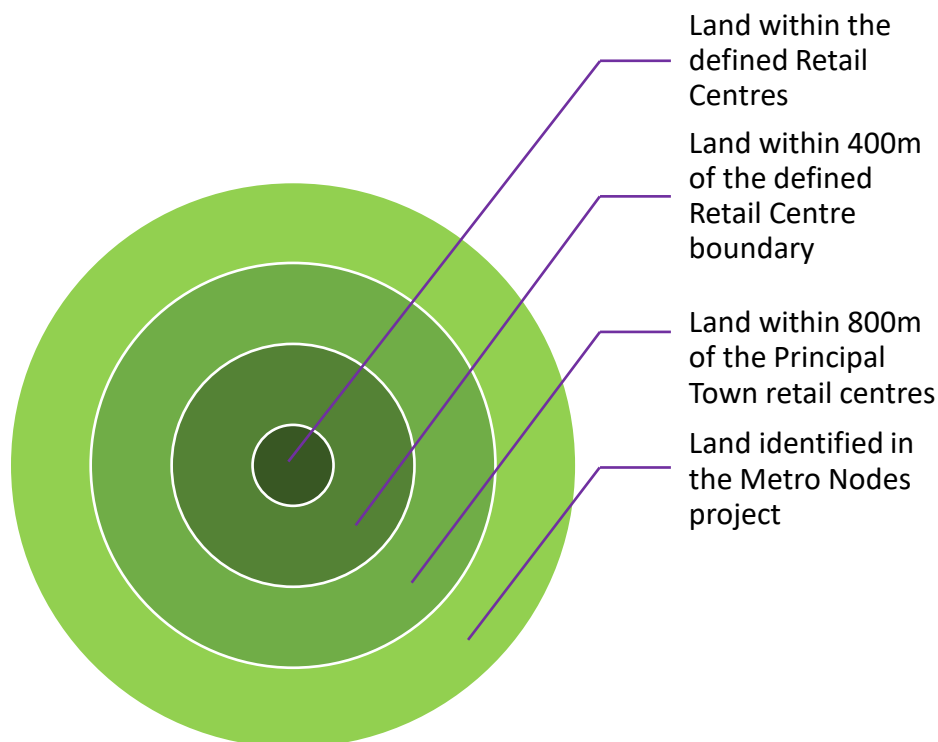
- Vacant land within the settlement boundary
- Previously developed vacant and derelict land and buildings (non-housing)
- Intensification of existing housing areas
- Conversion of large/commercial buildings
- Open space surplus to requirements
- Redevelopment of car parks

5.2 Retail Centres and buffer zones

The search sequence follows a top-down approach, following the retail hierarchy set out in policies NSA 18 and SSA 16 of the adopted LDP. These policies set out three tiers to the retail hierarchy, with Principal Town Centres at the top comprised of Pontypridd, Aberdare and Llantrisant (including Talbot Green). The middle tier consists of Key Settlement retail centres, including Llanharan, Tonyrefail, Ferndale, Hirwaun, Mountain Ash, Porth, Treorchy and Tonypany. The remaining retail centres across RCT are classed as Local and Neighbourhood Centres.

The search sequence explores opportunities for residential development within all retail centres on both greenfield and brownfield land. As previously stated, floors above shops within the retail centres were not searched for during this study, as it is considered more appropriate for this to form a separate, comprehensive stand-alone piece of work for the evidence base.

Following this, a search of brownfield and greenfield was undertaken within 400m of all retail centres. A search of brownfield and greenfield sites was also undertaken within 800m of Principal Towns only. This is because the Principal Towns are the most sustainable centres in RCT with the a far wide breadth of services and facilities and wider catchment areas.



5.3 Lapsed planning permissions

The UCS also considers all sites within the settlement boundaries and appropriate retail buffer areas that have previously gained planning permission for 1+ dwellings but have since lapsed. As with the retail buffer zone sites, any sites situated within flood zones or areas of ecological importance are excluded.

This approach allows the study to identify sites which may have been missed, and may include opportunities for building conversions or flats above shops, which would not have been able to be identified simply by following the above methodology alone.

5.4 Metro Node Sites

As mentioned in section 4.2, a previous study conducted by the Council identified sites suitable for residential development (including mixed-use residential) within walking distance to existing train stations and potential park and rides.

The majority of retail centres in RCT are within close proximity to a train station. Sites which were identified as part of the Metro Node project have also been carried forward into this study.

6. Assessment of identified sites

Excluding sites within flood zones and/or sites of ecological interest, a total of 386 sites were initially identified, including 66 newly found sites from the search sequence, 97 metro node sites, and 223 lapsed permission sites.

Following this, the 66 search sites and 97 metro node sites were then subjected to an assessment of suitability for potential housing development. This assessment followed the same criteria as was used in the Candidate Site stage 1 assessment. Factors considered included, but was not limited to, the following:

- Physical constraints
- Likelihood of achieving appropriate vehicular access
- Likelihood of achieving appropriate pedestrian access
- Agricultural land classification
- Conflicting adjoining land-uses
- Access to public open space

Meanwhile, lapsed permission sites were assessed with regard to their physical constraints in order to sift out any sites would be unlikely to be capable of accommodating development. Given that previous planning permissions have demonstrated that residential land-use is acceptable in principle at these sites, full assessments of these sites following Candidate Site criteria have therefore not been deemed necessary. Such physical constraints are set out as follows:

- Serious topographical constraints;
- Heavily vegetated land - where the size of the site would be likely prevent any ecological enhancement;
- Land contamination constraints;
- Land instability constraints - where the majority of the site was within a high-risk coal area.

Following these assessments of all sites, the total number of sites was reduced to 190, with just 20 being 'large sites' (0.3ha or more) with the remaining sites classed as 'small sites' (less than 0.3ha). The findings of study have been set in the following section.

7. Findings

Tables 1 and 2 set out the quantity and total size of large/small sites found within proximity to each retail centre across RCT. Following this, an estimated total number of dwellings which could potentially be delivered at the sites is also provided, one for sites within retail centres and one for sites within the buffer zones.

The majority of sites within retail centres came from the 'lapsed permission' site search. Where possible, the figures for dwellings within retail centres has followed the number of dwellings approved with the associated lapsed permission. Otherwise, sites within retail centres have been calculated at 30 dwellings per hectare, meanwhile sites outside the retail centre have been calculated at 20 dwellings per hectare. While RCTCBC would usually expect higher density levels, lower densities have been used for this exercise due to the significant uncertainty as to how many and how much of the sites could and would be developed for housing.

7.1 Large sites

There is generally a lack of large sites that were able to be found from the UCS. 21 of the 36 retail centres (58.3%) in RCT had no large sites in close enough proximity. Furthermore, no large sites were identified within any of the retail centres across RCT, regardless of the size of the retail centre.

80% of large sites identified through the process of this study are located in the Northern Strategy Area (NSA). Additionally, the overall size of the large sites are far greater in the NSA than the Southern Strategy Area (SSA), with almost 89.5% of the land comprising the large sites being within the SSA.

A total of 343 dwellings could be expected to be built at large sites within 400m of Key Settlement Retail Centres and Local and Neighbourhood Retail Centres, at a housing density of 20 dwellings per hectare.

The highest number of sites were found to be in Treherbert (4), Hirwaun (2) and Tonypany (2). Approximately one third of the 343 potential dwellings are located in Treherbert, while Hirwaun, Mountain Ash and Penrhiwceiber each also contribute approximately 11% to the total amount of dwellings at large sites.

Of the 20 large sites, only 3 were greenfield (1 in the SSA, 2 in the NSA). The remaining 17 sites were either brownfield or a combination of greenfield and brownfield land.

7.2 Small sites

Only 3 of the 36 retail centres (8.3%) in RCT had no small sites in either within the retail centre or within an appropriate buffer zone. A total of approximately 318 dwellings may be possible from the 170 small sites identified. Similar to the large sites, approximately 70% of small sites are located within the NSA. Sites in the NSA also appear to be larger than sites in the SSA, constituting 81.5% of the total hectares identified.

Approximately 90% of sites within retail centres occurred at the Principal Towns and Key Settlements. This is likely to be because of the greater quantity of multi-storey buildings within Principal Towns and Key Settlements, whereas the Local and Neighbourhood Centres are largely comprised of one- and two-storey buildings.

Pontypridd (17) and Treforest (17) hold the highest number of small sites, meanwhile Pontypridd also has the highest number of sites within its retail centre. Hirwaun, Maerdy and Aberaman have the most land available for small sites.

Of the 170 sites identified, only 13 sites are greenfield (100% of which are located in the NSA). The remaining 157 sites are either brownfield land or a combination of brownfield and greenfield.

8. Conclusion and Recommendations

The UCS search has identified a total of 190 sites in sustainable locations, 13 of which were within retail centres and 177 within either 400m to Key Settlement or Local and Neighbourhood retail centres, or 800m to Principal Town retail centres. It is estimated that these sites would be able to deliver approximately 661 dwellings, if they were to be developed, spread almost evenly across large sites (51.9%) and small sites (48.1%).

With regard to the Council's housing growth aspirations, 661 dwellings is not a substantial figure to be able to rely heavily upon. If all of these sites did come forward during the plan period, this would only average approximately 44 dwellings per year from 2022-2037.

The methodology has ensured that any sites identified in the study would be within highly sustainable locations and would strongly accord with the aims of national planning policy and guidance. The UCS has focused heavily on brownfield sites, as well as sites within the settlement boundary. However, the lack of land identified in this study would indicate that a greater need for greenfield expansion as may be necessary in order to achieve sufficient and aspirational growth, rather than brownfield sites.

The outcome of the UCS suggests that a spatial strategy focusing growth within town and retail centres is highly unlikely to be feasible, due to lack of land availability suitable for sufficient residential development.

Furthermore, the spatial distribution of sites identified during the UCS process suggests that future windfall sites are more likely to arise in the NSA rather than the SSA, whereas the Candidate Site process has revealed greater interest from developers in the SSA than the NSA. Sites in the NSA may therefore be more reliant on windfall sites, meanwhile the SSA will be more reliant on allocations.

Table 1: Breakdown of large sites identified in the UCS

Large Sites					
Nearest Retail Centre		No. of sites	Hectares	Potential dwellings within retail centre	Potential dwellings within buffer zones to retail centres
Total	North	16	15.36	0	307
	South	4	1.81	0	36
Principal Towns	Aberdare	0	0	0	0
	North	0	0	0	0
	Pontypridd	1	0.5	0	10
	Talbot Green	0	0	0	0
	South	1	0.5	0	10
Key Settlements	Ferndale	0	0	0	0
	Hirwaun	2	1.82	0	36
	Mountain Ash	1	1.97	0	39
	Porth	0	0	0	0
	Treorchy	0	0	0	0
	Tonypanydy	2	1.03	0	21
	North	5	4.82	0	96
	Llanharan	0	0	0	0
	Tonyrefail	1	0.57	0	11
South	1	0.57	0	11	
Local and Neighbourhood Centres	Gelli	0	0	0	0
	Maerdy	1	0.31	0	6
	Pentre	0	0	0	0
	Penygraig	0	0	0	0
	Ton Pentre	0	0	0	0
	Trebanog	1	0.66	0	13
	Treherbert	4	5.91	0	118
	Tynewydd	0	0	0	0
	Williamstown	0	0	0	0
	Ynyshir	1	0.4	0	8
	Ystrad	1	0.35	0	7
	Aberaman	0	0	0	0
	Abercynon	1	0.33	0	7
	Gadlys	0	0	0	0
	Penrhiwceiber	1	1.85	0	37
	Trecynon	1	0.72	0	14
	Ynysybwl	0	0	0	0
	North	11	10.53	0	211
	Church Village	0	0	0	0
	Llantrisant Old Town	0	0	0	0
	Pontyclun	0	0	0	0
	Rhydyfelin	1	0.43	0	9
	Taffs Well	0	0	0	0
	Tonteg	1	0.31	0	6
	Treforest	0	0	0	0
	Tyn-y-Nant	0	0	0	0
	South	2	0.74	0	15

Table 2: Breakdown of small sites identified in the UCS

Small Sites					
Retail Centre		No. of sites	Hectares	Potential housing units within retail centre	Potential housing units within buffer zones to retail centres
Total	North	120	11.38	22	223
	South	50	2.59	16	57
Principal Towns	Aberdare	4	0.27	0	5
	North	4	0.27	0	5
	Pontypridd	17	0.75	14	14
	Talbot Green	1	0.09	0	2
	South	18	0.84	14	16
Key Settlements	Ferndale	6	0.2	8	3
	Hirwaun	12	1.34	1	26
	Mountain Ash	8	0.52	0	10
	Porth	2	0.33	0	7
	Treorchy	3	0.38	4	6
	Tonypandy	11	1.04	6	19
	North	45	3.81	19	71
	Llanharan	1	0.26	0	5
	Tonyrefail	4	0.26	1	5
	South	5	0.52	1	10
Local and Neighbourhood Centres	Gelli	2	0.13	0	3
	Maerdy	6	0.96	0	19
	Pentre	8	0.52	0	10
	Penygraig	4	0.46	0	9
	Ton Pentre	3	0.21	0	4
	Trebanog	2	0.06	0	2
	Treherbert	6	0.37	0	7
	Tynewydd	2	0.48	0	10
	Williamstown	1	0.03	0	1
	Ynyshir	1	0.19	0	4
	Ystrad	2	0.27	0	5
	Aberaman	14	1.01	2	20
	Abercynon	3	0.34	0	7
	Gadlys	1	0.05	0	1
	Penrhiwceiber	4	0.55	0	11
	Trecynon	7	0.66	0	13
	Ynysybwl	8	1.01	1	20
	North	77	7.3	3	146
	Church Village	0	0	0	0
	Llantrisant Old Town	4	0.19	0	4
	Pontyclun	1	0.07	0	1
	Rhydyfelin	4	0.27	0	5
	Taffs Well	0	0	0	0
	Tonteg	1	0.22	0	4
	Treforest	17	0.48	1	16
	Tyn-y-Nant	0	0	0	0
	South	27	1.23	1	31

